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Perspectives

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# *Inside British Politics*



# If Truss has already won, how does she unite the party?

As the Conservative Party leadership contest approaches its final week, we ask whether frontrunner Liz Truss has already sealed victory, and if so, what this means for Rishi Sunak and his key Parliamentary supporters as she seeks to unite the party.

## CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

With the Chair of the Conservative Party's 1922 Committee of backbenchers, Sir Graham Brady MP, himself proclaiming after last week's Manchester hustings that the leadership contest could have been shorter, even the most hardened politics enthusiast could be forgiven for thinking that the race – which began on 12th July – has gone on for too long.

This feeling will have been exacerbated by the fact that Liz Truss surged ahead in Conservative Party membership polling from the moment the race was narrowed down to her and Rishi Sunak – and she has remained firmly in the lead. To many political commentators, the race is a foregone conclusion, and much of the idle August chatter amongst the commentariat has focused on who will be in, or out, of a Truss government. There is a distinct sense of the calm before the storm.

It is difficult to argue that any of the four TV debates and eleven membership hustings around the country have significantly moved the dial. The polling since the beginning of the contest backs this up:

## YUOGOV POLLS FOR TRUSS VS SUNAK



Source: [YouGov](#) Poll of 879 Conservative Party Members, 12th - 13th July 2022



Source: [YouGov](#) Poll of 725 Conservative Party members, 18th - 19th July 2022



Source: [YouGov](#) Poll of 730 Conservative Party members, 20th - 21st July 2022



Source: [YouGov](#) Poll of 1043 Conservative Party Members, 29th July - 2nd August 2022



Source: [YouGov](#) Poll of 1089 Conservative Party Members, 12th - 17th August 2022

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The polling not only reflects the notable lead Truss has over Sunak, but also the fact it increased significantly in the week ahead of the ballot opening.

It is also important to remember that unlike a traditional election, where polls open for one day at the end of a campaigning period, voting has been open since early August, meaning that any late surge of support amongst members for Sunak would be negligible.

With all this in mind, where does it leave Rishi Sunak and the key MPs who have supported him?

## **SUNAK'S BIG HITTERS**

The most significant development – in what has been a relatively quiet two weeks in the contest – has this week been Michael Gove's backing of Rishi Sunak, announced in his op-ed in *The Times* on Saturday, where he also criticised Liz Truss's approach to dealing with inflation and the cost of living crisis.

Gove's declaration was a significant fillip for camp Sunak but was it too little, too late? While Michael Gove's own leadership ambitions are now a thing of the past – and his own political judgement limited him in this regard – he is well-respected within the Parliamentary party and is considered one of the most effective ministers in delivering policy and reforming government departments.

Some might ask: has this eliminated any chance of Gove taking a role in a Truss Cabinet? Not that Gove would care, it would appear. He said: "I do not expect to be in government again. But it was the privilege of my life to spend 11 years in the cabinet under three prime ministers." However, given Gove's status within the party, and the potential for he and his allies to make trouble from the backbenches, Team Truss would be well advised to consider carefully whether they may wish to find a role for Gove should she become the next Prime Minister as expected.

While there has been a recent drought of high profile announcements for Sunak – with Education Select Committee Chair Rob Halfon MP the last MP before Gove to declare his support for the ex-Chancellor on 7th August – he still boasts several leading party figures in his team, namely:

- **Steve Barclay** – promoted to Health Secretary by Boris Johnson in July following the swathe of Cabinet resignations and has served Cabinet roles in the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury, the latter under his ally Rishi Sunak. He is a Brexiteer who was close to the Johnson administration.
- **Grant Shapps** – has been Transport Secretary for the last three years and recently proposed a "16-point plan" to tackle 'Luddite' unions as strikes continue to affect the transport system. He switched to Sunak as soon as his own leadership bid failed and has extensive ministerial experience.
- **Dominic Raab** – the current Deputy Prime Minister, who described Liz Truss's plans for tax cuts as an 'electoral suicide note' earlier this month. There has been no love lost between the two during the campaign, but he brings a wealth of experience to the table as a past Foreign Secretary.
- **Jeremy Hunt** – the former Health Secretary and Chair of the Health Select Committee who came second in the 2019 Conservative Party leadership contest to Boris Johnson and has served on the backbenches ever since. He has not been associated with the Johnson government and threw his hat into the ring earlier in this contest. Untainted by recent government crises, and with extensive Departmental experience, he may well be seeking a comeback at an opportune moment.
- **Oliver Dowden** – the former Co-Chair of the party who resigned when the Conservatives lost two by-elections on the same day in June. He had a relatively successful stint as Culture Secretary during the difficulties of the pandemic but publicly criticised Liz Truss's plans to lower National Insurance earlier this month.

## **IS THERE ROOM FOR SUNAK SUPPORTERS INSIDE THE TRUSS TENT?**

In addition to overwhelming membership support, Liz Truss now has a thin majority support of MPs within the Conservative Party. She will have promised jobs – and feel obliged to offer jobs – to MPs who have supported her throughout the contest.

In the absence of a neck-and-neck leadership race, there has been much talk of who is likely to serve in a Truss Cabinet, from close political ally Kwasi Kwarteng as Chancellor to Suella Braverman as Home Secretary and James Cleverly as Foreign Secretary.

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Yet Truss will also be determined to restore party unity following months of open rebellion under Johnson's leadership and blue-on-blue sparring during the leadership contest itself. With early signs of the Labour Party beginning to shape the political narrative over the summer on the cost of living, and just two years until the next General Election, effective policy delivery and unity will be crucial in retaining – and winning back – the public support that won the Conservatives the 2019 election which has since begun to ebb away.

The cost of living crisis is set to intensify in the coming months and is likely to dominate government policy during a winter of discontent. A united Conservative Party and a clear plan of action to tackle the torrent of issues facing the new government will be critical if Truss is to lead her party to victory in 2024.

***This begs the following questions – will Truss invite Rishi Sunak and his supporters into her government? And should she?***

Rishi Sunak himself has this week indicated that he would not serve under a Truss administration. Speaking on BBC Radio 2, when asked about rumours he would be offered the job of Health Secretary by Truss, he said: "One thing I have reflected on as well a bit is being in a government, in cabinet, over the last couple of years, you really need to agree with the big things. Because it is tough, as I found, when you don't. And I wouldn't want to end up in a situation like that again."

He went further at Tuesday's hustings in Birmingham, saying that if the Government follows Liz Truss's energy plan that "millions of people face destitution." Moreover, he refused to commit to voting for Liz Truss's planned economic measures in an emergency Budget. Is this simply a tactic to present clear blue water between him and his rival in the final stretch of the race, or a commitment that he will hold that will influence large parts of the party?

Words during a leadership contest are one thing, decisions made in the light of a new era of government another. Sunak was being tipped by political commentators as a potential new Health Secretary to bring radical ideas on how to deal with the precarious state of the NHS and make it fit for the future; and that keeping him inside the tent would be better off than out during a time in which the Conservative Party needs to focus on meeting its 2019 manifesto commitments and placing the country on a more secure economic footing. However, Sunak's strong positioning against his opponent currently makes it difficult to see him being offered – or accepting – a role in a Truss administration.

Truss therefore may look to others in the Sunak camp to help bind the party together, because while Truss does have the support of 145 MPs, it is only by a total of 13, with 132 MPs having firmly declared their support for Sunak. It is effectively a party split.

Appointing one or two 'big hitters' from Sunak's campaign who have a combination of the respect of Parliamentary colleagues, proven effective delivery in government and the ability to foster cohesion at Cabinet level, would significantly assist Truss and her team in rebuilding a fractured party ahead of what is set to be a punishing period economically and socially. Leaving them out altogether may prove costly.

**KEY DATES AHEAD:**

**The final week, w/c 29th August**

- Liz Truss will be interviewed by Nick Robinson on BBC One on Tuesday 30th August at 7pm.
- The final members' hustings event will take place in London on Wednesday 31st August.
- The vote closes at 5pm on Friday 2nd September. Any votes received after that time, whether online or via post, will not be counted.

**w/c 5th September**

- The new Conservative Party leader – and Prime Minister – will be announced on Monday 5th September.
- Current Prime Minister Boris Johnson is expected to leave office on Tuesday 6th September. It is therefore likely that the new Prime Minister will form a new Cabinet later that day and into Wednesday 7th September.

*FGS Global will provide a comprehensive briefing of the Prime Minister's new Cabinet as soon as it is assembled.*

